

One foot in front of the other...

The Walk of a Lifetime

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The promise a brother made to his sister to walk her down the aisle on her wedding day seemed like a simple task, however that promise became secondary to his obligation as a Soldier.

Spc. Keith E. Deutsch's plans to be at his sister's wedding in their hometown of New Prague, Minn., suddenly changed when he found out he was mobilizing to Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

"When my father died 11 years ago, I knew I would have to have someone else walk me down the aisle at my wedding. My father was a big part of my life, but I knew that either my mother or my two brothers would be the right replacement," said Deutsch's sister, Jessica J. Frantz.

Initially, she asked her mother to walk her down the aisle, but her mother was concerned about being too emotional on the day of the wedding. She then made the decision to have both of her brothers walk her down the aisle.

On February 14th, 2003, Deutsch went to his mailbox thinking he was going to retrieve the normal assortment of mail along with some Valentine's Day cards from his family and friends. Instead, he found a letter with a set of military orders directing him to mobilize.

Deutsch told his older sister he didn't think he would be able to walk her down the aisle because chances were he would still be in Iraq at the

time of the wedding. Frantz was scheduled to marry on October 18th, Deutsch's deployment meant their other brother, Nick, would have to walk her down the aisle by himself.

"I asked my other brother, Nick, if he would walk me down the aisle by himself because Keith was already at Fort Carson waiting to go to Iraq," said Frantz.

Deutsch was a heavy equipment operator with the 367th Engineer Battalion based in Mankato, Minn. He drove bulldozers, dump trucks and front-end loaders. When Deutsch mobilized, he was attached to the 244th Engineer Battalion, 4th Infantry Division. After spending a short time in Boulder, Colo., with the members of the 244th Engineer Battalion, Deutsch flew to Iraq with his new unit on May 20th.

Deutsch said there was high level of anxiety amongst the Soldiers while waiting in Kuwait for their equipment to arrive.

Deutsch said, "We kept ourselves busy by performing preventative maintenance on their vehicles and doing physical training."

The tall, lanky Deutsch told how everyone's temperament changed at the end of June, when the mortar

rounds began to land.

"We were in a place called Camp Normandy when I was injured. We were improving their base," said Deutsch.

On the morning of August 29th, while fueling their vehicles in preparation for a convoy, Deutsch and his fellow Soldiers came under enemy attack. The Soldiers suffered a number of serious casualties. Deutsch had his right leg amputated above the knee and received a major shrapnel wound to his stomach from the impact of the rocket propelled grenade attack near their base camp.

"We just returned fire. Usually they don't hit anything with their rocket propelled grenades, this time they got lucky," said Deutsch.

Shortly after the devastation of the



Spc. Keith E. Deutsch (right) shares the honor of walking his sister, Jessica, to the altar with his brother Nick.

Photo donated by the Deutsch family.

blast, Deutsch was evacuated to Kuwait and later transferred to Landstuhl Army Hospital in Germany.

Once his injuries were treated and stabilized, he was transferred to Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C. While receiving treatment at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, Deutsch received visits from dignitaries ranging from Bruce Willis to President George W. Bush. After spending two months in the hospital he was flown to the Twin Cities where he spent several weeks in the Minneapolis Veteran's Affairs Medical Center.

The doctors there led Deutsch through a rigorous rehabilitation program. He faced the incredible challenge of learning how to walk with a prosthetic leg due to his amputation.

The determination to make good on his promise to his sister was proven with the long hours and hard work Deutsch put in for his rehabilitation. The entire Deutsch family was hard at work preparing for the wedding while the bride-to-be was wondering what her wedding day was going to be like.

When Frantz got to Minnesota, Keith was still at the Minneapolis Veteran's Affairs Medical Center. He seemed to be doing well, but was still having complications with the shrapnel wounds to his stomach.

"Things were looking up and we thought he'd be back in New Prague for the weekend of the wedding," said

Frantz. However, on Thursday night her mother called and said that Keith had developed an extremely high fever and that she would be staying at the hospital until the doctors figured out what was wrong, she explained.

On Friday, Frantz was finishing some last minute wedding details while waiting to hear how Keith was doing. She began to wonder if he would be able to leave the hospital.

Frantz said, "When I arrived home to get ready for the rehearsal dinner my mom was there and told me that I should go down to the basement - there was a surprise for me. Thinking that someone had dropped off a wedding gift I went downstairs. As I reached the bottom of

the stairs, there was Keith!"

It was the best wedding gift ever said Frantz. After a few hugs Keith urged his sister back upstairs to get ready for the rehearsal and rehearsal dinner. Keith participated in the rehearsal - not even using his crutches for one of the run-throughs. After the rehearsal dinner he was pretty exhausted so he went home for an early night.

The next day he went with all the other groomsmen to get ready at the local hotel. He was there for all the pictures, but more importantly he was there with Nick and his sister on her wedding day, October 18, 2003.

Frantz said when the back doors to the church opened, the three of them walked in together. Everyone could feel the emotion in the air. It could be seen through the proud smiles and teary eyes watching as the three made their way to the front of the church. "I can't think of any other time in my life where I felt more elated and proud," said Frantz.

"I think your wedding day goes by faster than any other

day in your life and all I know is that it was perfect! Not only because I was getting married, but because Keith, along with the rest of my family was able to be there. The day was just as I'd been imagining it for years. The typical New Prague wedding I had always dreamed of," said Frantz.

Frantz's dream became a reality. Not due to chance, nor to good fortune did Deutsch walk his sister down the aisle. It

was due to what he was made of. Something in him would not be defeated. He would not be forced to break his promise.

"There are too many people praying for the mountains of difficulty to be removed, when what they really need is courage to climb them." - Raili A Jeffery.

Deutsch showed that he had the personal courage, the last of the seven Army values, to face the adversity laid before him. He proved his courage to himself with every 'step' of his rehabilitation. He proved his courage to the world with every step he took down the aisle.

"The greatest achievement is not in never falling, but in rising again after you fall." - Vince Lombardi.



Actor Gary Sinise was one of the famous actors who spent time with Deutsch. Sinise actually visited with Deutsch twice.

Photo donated by the Deutsch family.